



Childhood On The Hill: Growing Up in the Riverview Hospital Community



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Riverview Hospital was a relatively remote community from the 1920s to the late 1930s, with staff, doctors and psychiatric nurses living on site in a staff neighbourhood that operated as a largely self-sufficient village. The children of hospital staff experienced the grounds of Riverview Hospital and mental health care from a unique perspective, forming a distinct community of their own. They were residents, but not patients; the children of staff, but without authority. They attended the local Essondale school, ran errands to community shops, played on sports fields and in pools, worked part time on paper routes and attended community events for both residents and staff. The hospital grounds were their playground and the setting for their childhood.

Up On The Hill, a memoir by Tommy Symington, is the only published written account of a child's experience growing up at Riverview Hospital. Symington, the son of the hospital's plumber, describes seasonal adventures with other staff children, the involvement of hospital residents in his life and the work policies that governed his father, providing a detailed snapshot of life for Riverview Hospital staff. Symington likely lived in one of the six Oak Terrace Cottages designated as employee accommodations in the 1920s. His home became the starting point for his story as he describes the social connections and places that shaped life at the hospital, providing directions to various locations from his home.

"Daily routines...were governed by the blast of a loud steam whistle. It emitted its first sound at 6:30 am to awaken everyone for their daily tasks, and subsequently one at 8 am for people to commence their daily duties, with repeated blasts to signify such at 12 pm and the end of the day at 5 pm."

— Tommy Symington, *Up On The Hill*, p. 1

With the loud echo of the steam whistle, the children of Riverview Hospital rose with the hospital residents. They walked from the staff neighbourhood through the waking hospital grounds, past the nurses' home, where nurses in starched, pressed uniforms made their way to work, and arrived at Essondale School, located just west of the road to Colony Farm.



Built to serve the children of hospital employees, the one-room schoolhouse taught Grades 1 to 8 and was staffed by a single teacher. In the late fall and winter, the school's janitorial duties, including tending the furnace and chopping wood, were performed by a Riverview Hospital resident. Another resident performed similar tasks at Symington's home.² In this way, hospital residents became an integral part of Symington's childhood. He recalls how, on cold, wet days, these two places provided a sense of comfort.

While histories of mental health institutions often focus on medical issues and relationships between staff and residents, the relationships between residents and children described in this memoir provide another perspective on the history of Riverview Hospital and insight into its social structures. Symington also writes about children who were not related to staff but were residents at Riverview Hospital. His home was located across from the Industrial Boys' School, where the children were permitted to use the gym and swimming pool at certain times. When they attended occasional concerts in the school's auditorium, he recalls that they "weren't allowed to talk to the boys and likewise they couldn't talk to us." He also remembers the school's clean, spartan atmosphere.³ Later in his memoir, Symington expresses sympathy for these young residents as he recalls playing in a nearby park and ravine, where bridges and pathways had been built by the Industrial Boys' School. These physical and social boundaries remained part of his memories. Interestingly, however, Symington had more contact with Riverview Hospital's adult residents than with children his own age.

In the fall, after the school bell rang, the Riverview children would run to a small grove of walnut trees near the pigpen. There, they would climb the trees, shake the branches and gather the wrinkled shells in sacks to bring home and dry.⁴ If they weren't collecting walnuts, the children often trudged down to the 400-hectare Colony Farm, now known as Łéxətəm Regional Park. From the early 1910s to the 1980s, the farm was operated by residents who produced hundreds of tonnes of crops, ran a major dairy operation and supplied the hospital with fresh meat, dairy and produce. Residents received a small salary in return.⁵



Symington remembers that, after tiring of climbing the huge barns and swinging down from hay-bale ropes, the Riverview children would sneak into the dairy and drink fresh milk straight from the bucket. Under the guidance of residents, the children learned how to milk the cows and fill the milking pails to the brim. He also recalled being amazed by one resident who could “pick up a full 10-gal can of milk in each hand.”⁶

As he got older, Symington began delivering the morning paper, the News Herald, earning five dollars a month. He started by picking up the papers at the Male Chronic Building and then cycling to various buildings across the Riverview Hospital grounds.⁷ His paper route gave Symington an opportunity to venture beyond the staff neighbourhood and observe other parts of the hospital grounds. Through his interactions with staff and residents, he learned that some residents were granted ground privileges that ended precisely at 8:30 p.m., with much of their time spent on routine tasks such as chopping wood for staff and the school.

In the winter, the roads were cleared and the snow packed down by a horse-drawn plough. The children took advantage of the smooth, icy surface and spent hours speeding down the hill and across the west lawn. Some of their sleds were crafted by residents who worked in the carpenter shop.

Below the Veterans Block, across the road near the river, was a pond that served as a community skating rink. Staff and residents of Riverview Hospital played games on the ice, including snap the whip and hockey.

Essondale School also served as a gathering place for social events, including whist drives, meetings and Christmas concerts led by students or the Riverview Hospital staff band. These events were primarily for staff families and contributed to the neighbourhood-like feel of the Riverview Hospital grounds.⁹ As spring arrived, the Riverview children took advantage of the warmer weather, heading down to the Coquitlam River. Some residents built boats to rent to sport fishermen, while others allowed the children to borrow boats for their own adventures.

“If the oolichans were running, we could venture out into the Fraser River and catch them with a large can... Tom Sawyer had nothing on us, we were Tom Sawyer in the living flesh.”

— Tommy Symington, *Up On The Hill*, p. 12¹⁰

In the summer, community events were held for hospital staff, residents and the broader Coquitlam community. Colony Farm was featured in agricultural exhibitions, and Essondale School held an end-of-school picnic in Stanley Park.¹¹ Throughout the summer, children filled the streets, making makeshift go-karts out of wheelbarrows and iron pokers, attempting to ride the cows bareback at the bison ranch at Colony Farm, and climbing the cherry, apple and plum trees in the orchard near the fire hall. On weekends throughout the year, families left Riverview Hospital to stock up on groceries or visit nearby family. For many, these outings were the only time they left the hospital grounds during the week. When telephones were installed in staff residences, however, these plans could be interrupted, with Symington's father often being called in to work long hours of overtime without additional pay.¹²

In 1939, Symington's father died, and the family left the grounds and the only home they had known. The transition was difficult for the family. Symington later recalled, “I didn't realise until later years how fortunate we were to be living at Essondale where we had a nice home and a real happy and pleasant environment.”¹³

Riverview Hospital had a significant impact on the social and economic development of Coquitlam. For much of the 20th century, the hospital was one of the city's largest employers, supporting thousands of local jobs in nursing, trades and food production. The hospital also subsidized staff accommodation and provided employees with wages that offered greater stability during the economic downturn of the 1930s.¹⁴ For Symington's family, leaving the grounds meant starting over in an older home and saying goodbye to the self-contained community they had known as home.

Symington's recollections in *Up On The Hill* provide a unique perspective on the coexistence of hospital residents and the families who lived and worked at Riverview Hospital. The children who played on the grounds encountered residents as part of their everyday lives, often with curiosity rather than the stigma associated with mental illness at the time. Through these interactions, they learned practical skills and experienced acts of kindness and support from residents who became part of their childhood.

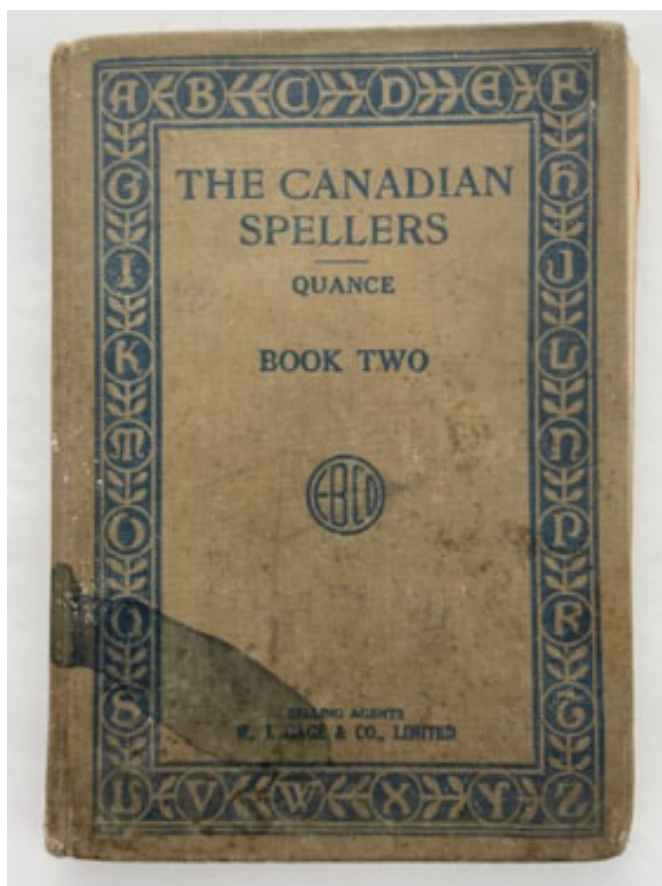
List of figures:



Bathing Cap

In use around 1940
Children of Riverview Hospital
staff were permitted to swim in the
indoor pool at the Boys Industrial
School during specific times.

RV0982



The Canadian Spellers: Book Two

In use around 1939
Children of Essondale School played
games such as snap the whip and
hockey on a community skating rink
below the Veterans Block.

RV1250

List of figures:



Signboard

In usage around 1970

Holidays played a major role in the lives of both Riverview Hospital's residents and the families of staff. Boards such as this one were posted on wards.

RV0593



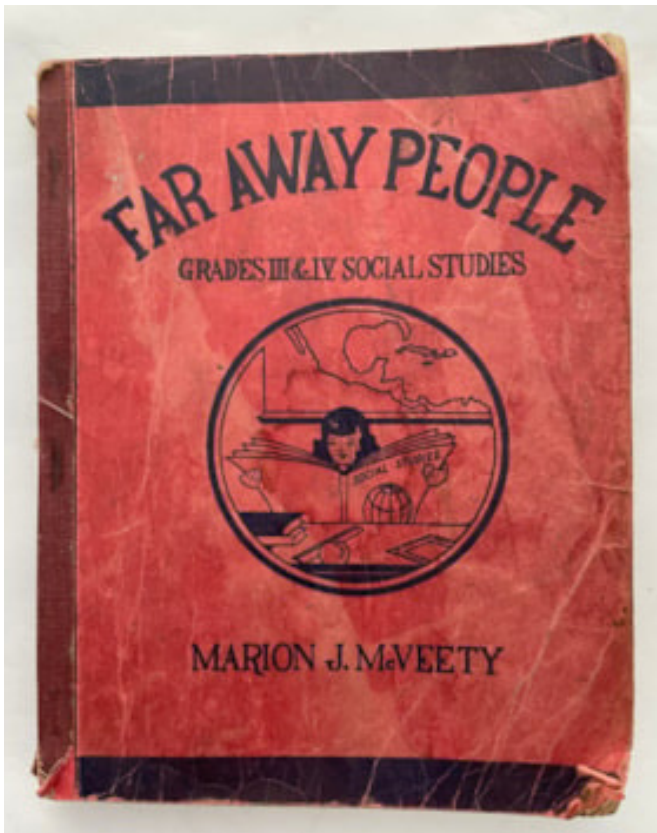
Telephone

In usage around 1931

When the home phone was introduced to staff residences, family plans could be interrupted by resident needs requiring unpaid overtime.

RV0292

List of figures:



Far Away People: Grades III & IV Social Studies

Manufacture date 1942

Children of Riverview Hospital staff attended Essondale School. A one room schoolhouse, it taught students in grades one through eight.

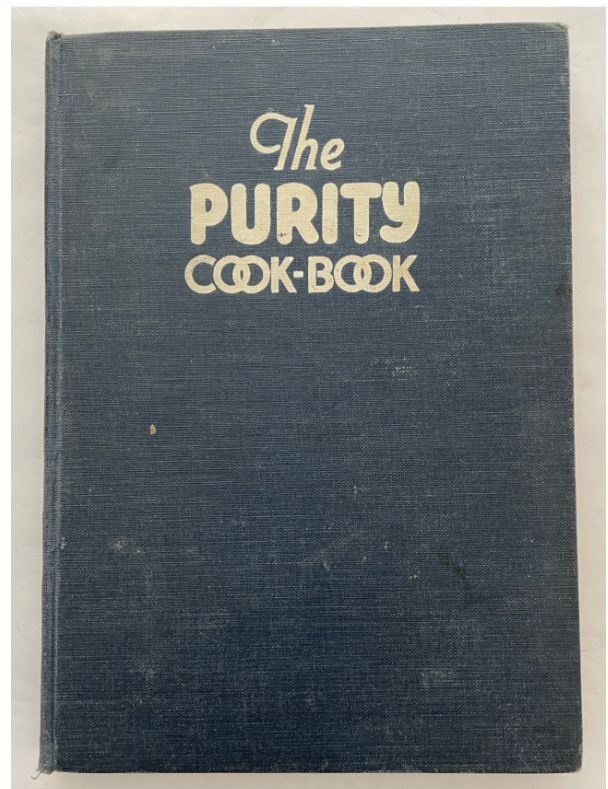
RV1252

The Purity Cook-Book

Manufacture date 1937

Christmas on the grounds of Riverview Hospital for staff and their families, was a social time filled with Christmas gatherings and bake sales.

RV1291



Notes:

1. Symington, Tommy. Up On The Hill. City of Coquitlam Archives, 2004, p. 1.
2. Symington, Up On The Hill, p. 1.
3. Symington, Up On The Hill, pp. 3-4.
4. Symington, Up On The Hill, p. 2.
5. "Legen-Dairy Holstein Herd of Colony Farm." City of Coquitlam, 2026."
<https://www.coquitlam.ca/719/Legen-dairy-Holstein-Herd-of-Colony-Farm>.
6. Symington, Up On The Hill, p. 5.
7. Symington, Up On The Hill, p. 3.
8. Symington, Up On The Hill, p. 5.
9. Symington, Up On The Hill, p. 4.
10. Symington, Up On The Hill, p. 2.
11. Symington, Up On The Hill, p. 6.
12. Symington, Up On The Hill, p. 5.
13. Symington, Up On The Hill, p. 5.
14. Symington, Up On The Hill, p. 6.

Sources:

"Legen-Dairy Holstein Herd of Colony Farm." City of Coquitlam, 2026."
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